

A SKETCH
OF THE
SLAVE TRADE
IN THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,

CONTAINED IN TWO LETTERS.

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A SKETCH OF THE SLAVE TRADE, &c.

LETTER I.

Washington, D. C. Feb. 6, 1838.

My Dear Brother,—At the Convention held at Harrisburgh, it was agreed upon by the delegates from the western part of Penn. and myself, that I should proceed to that region as soon as my engagements would permit, with the view of laboring there in the duties of my agency. But being desirous to visit our national capital, not only for my own satisfaction, but because I supposed in so doing I might subserve the interests of our cause, I was induced to pursue rather a circuitous route to the scene of my future labors, for the purpose of taking this city in my way. An account of some of the incidents with which I have met, in the meantime, I think will not be without interest to you and your readers.

I left Harrisburg last Tuesday morning, in the stage for Baltimore. Nothing occurred to beguile away the tedium of our journey, excepting a little disputing on the subject of abolition, until we had crossed the Maryland line, some distance. There we stopped to take in passengers. Among these a young slaveholder, belonging to a very wealthy family of that neighborhood. He was a fair specimen of southern 'bloods,' and one of the rudest and most profane men I ever saw. When I first noticed him, which was in the tavern before we got into the stage, he was amusing himself with a well trained but very fierce bulldog, which he would start with a hiss after some of the men

about the house, and then stop him before he could bite them.—The people of the tavern endured his overbearing rudeness with a very ill grace, but were unwilling, as I supposed, to lose his patronage by crossing him. When he got into the stage he seemed disposed to give us a specimen of his spirit, in the curses he heaped upon his unoffending slave, who brought his baggage to be put into the boot. After we had started and rode some distance, he espied a little colored boy on horseback, at some distance from the road. He demanded of him, in a fierce and most profane manner, what he was doing there. Of course, the reply of the boy, at such a distance, could not be heard for the noise of the coach. He called upon him to come up to him—the boy hesitated; as the stage was going very fast. He then, in a tone and manner which seemed to frighten the boy, ordered him *immediately* to ride up along side of the stage. This he did, and rode along with the stage, until his master, so called, had catechised him sufficiently. He then gave him some curses and dismissed him.

These things seemed to excite little sensation among the other passengers, but to me it was exceedingly painful. It was painful to witness the horrid effect of slavery upon the temper and morals of the master; it was touching to see the poor boy's spirit broken by tyranny, and crouching with abject fear before such a consummate young ruffian, and it was a cause of painful reflection to think, that this fellow had *absolute power* over these and others of his fellow men, and to have proof furnished that he made abundant use of that power.

When he left the stage, which he soon did, one of the passengers observed, that was young Mr. J. P——, a high fellow, but having some fine traits of character—he loses a good deal of money by gaming, but fortunately he is not intemperate—adding that he was now on his way to Philadelphia after a runaway slave.

We arrived in Baltimore that evening, and at 9 o'clock the next morning set out for Washington. As the country through which we passed is very barren and devoid of interest, I threw myself into a seat beside the stove of the car, and gave myself up to my own reflections. From these I was not aroused until we reached, a stopping place, about 12 miles from this city. Here, as I was getting out of the car, a man opened the door of a baggage car which was next before ours, and was urging in a colored lad—"come, get in—hurry away—get in." Then

another was brought and put in—and another, in the same way. Then came the mother, with an infant on her bosom—the tears pouring over her cheeks, and sobbing as though her very heart was broken. Last of all came the sad looking father with his youngest boy; they entered the car with the rest, and the white man first mentioned, who, it appeared, was the purchaser, along with them. When the cars started, the colored people left behind (slaves, I suppose) came to the door, and kept bowing farewell, until we got out of sight. As we passed a field in which some hands were at work, the poor fellow just now spoken of as 'the father,' looked out, and in the most touching manner cried, "farewell! farewell!" adding with a kind of melancholy satisfaction, "I've got my whole family with me!" I turned away from the sad scene. If this is the pain, thought I, inflicted by this traffic, where family ties are left unbroken, what must be the agony of the poor victims, where these ties are ruthlessly sundered! As such reflections were rushing upon my mind, I was joined by the friend, with whom I had the dispute the day before, and who had berated the abolitionists without mercy; "there, Mr. M'Kim, there's a case for *you*." Yes, said I, a case for you too, Mr. _____. What do you think of it? "Oh, it's too bad, it's *horrid*," said he, "*it's DIABOLICAL*." And having thus begun, he continued to assert his abhorrence of the system of slavery in terms that would have been regarded as very denunciatory, if found in the columns of the *Liberator*. Our conversation was at length interrupted by our arrival at the city depot.

I took lodgings at a private boarding house, and, with as little delay as possible, hastened to the Capitol. Soon after I got into the 'House,' Mr. Adams took the floor in continuation of a speech begun on a former occasion, on our relations with Mexico. He was animadverting in severe terms upon the conduct of the administration, in taking a hostile attitude towards that government, when he was interrupted with the annunciation that the House had arrived for the 'order of the day.' This was a question which was producing much excitement among party politicians, but which possessed no interest for me—further than it served to elicit exhibitions of the mental powers of distinguished members of the House, with whose names the nation is familiar. Thus went by the day.

The next morning, in pursuance of the main object of my visit to this place, I set out for W. H. Williams' *Slave-factory*. It was a matter of some doubt to me, as I went

along, whether I should get in. I had been told, that if I wanted to get admittance I must "let on" that I wanted to buy slaves. This, of course, I could not do: but made up my mind to be perfectly candid, and practice no kind of deception. I inquired for the place—and was directed to it by a colored man; and by the way you need never be at a loss to find *that* house, while there is a colored man in Washington to inquire of. It was in 7th street, between Pennsylvania and Maryland avenues, not far from the centre of the city, and within a short distance of the stars and stripes of the capitol. It is a large but lonely and desolated looking house. I rapped at the door, which, after waiting some time, was opened by a stout, thickset man, dressed in a pea jacket, coat and fur cap, with large whiskers and stern countenance. Is Mr. Williams at home? "No, sir, he is in Natchez." "Have you any negroes now on hand?" "Yes, sir, we have a few; walk in." "I don't wish to purchase any—I merely wish to see your establishment—if you have no objection." "None at all, walk in, sir, Mr. Williams is now residing in Natchez—I am here as his agent. We have very few slaves for sale, of our own—most that are here belong to other people." While thus talking, he took me in, and handed me a seat. After some further conversation, into which he seemed to enter with much freedom, I again observed, that I had no "intention of purchasing, but wished to see, for my own gratification, his establishment, if he had no objections." "None at all, sir," and with that he went to a window on one side of the room, opened the shutters—threw up the sash, and invited me to look out. "This is our 'pen' sir." "Here," continued he, while I surveyed an area of about 40 feet square, enclosed partly by the walls of the out buildings, and partly by high jail walls built for the purpose, "here we allow them to take exercise, and the children to play." As it was very cold, the 'pen' was empty. They were all down in the cellar, the agent said. I asked to go down and see them. He accordingly led the way through a winding passage out into a temporary enclosure, which communicates with the 'pen.' He took out of his pocket a key opened a door which led us into the 'cellar.' Here, in an apartment of about 25 feet square, were about 30 slaves of all ages, sizes, and colors. I noticed one young girl of about 12 years of age, who seemed quite white, and anoth-

er a little child about two years old, of the same shade, and one of the most beautiful children I ever saw. The very small children were gamboling about, unconscious of their situation; but those of more advanced age were the most melancholy looking beings. The wistful, inquiring, anxious looks they cast at me (presuming, I suppose, that I came as a purchaser) were hard to endure. I soon descried the father and his family, that I saw torn away from their former home, the day before. "Where is your master taking you?" said the agent to the man, in answer to a question of mine put to him, of the same import: "To Alabama—I believe they call it," said the man in tones of the deepest sadness. His wife sat beside the stove nursing her infant, and never once looked up all the time we were in. Not feeling at liberty to ask questions of these poor things, I soon turned away. He then led me to two other apartments of about the same size; one of them not now used, the other appropriated as a sleeping apartment to the females. "Do all of these persons sleep down in that cellar? "Yes, sir—all the males;—they lie upon the floor—each one has got a couple of blankets." "But will that room accommodate so many?" "O Lord, yes, sir, three times as many!—last year we had as many as 139 in these three rooms." I could hardly see how this was possible without their lying on each other. "Well, very few, you say, of these persons belong to you." "Only a few, sir—most of them are put here by other gentlemen. You see, we can afford to keep them for 9 cents apiece cheaper than they can at the jail." "What is your charge?" "25 cents a day for all except children at the breast." He then showed me a table at one side of the enclosure, where their meals were served up. It was in the open air, with no other protection than a covering from the storm. In answer to my inquiries, he told me that they took their meals in the open air summer and winter. "But," said I, "don't they suffer very much from the cold?" "O Lord, no sir, they squat down and eat in ten minutes. We give them plenty of substantial food—herring, coffee sweetened with molasses, and corn bread." "How many meals do you give them in a day?" "Two, sir—one at 9 o'clock, and the other at 3."

After a good many other questions and answers which I have either forgotten, or deem unnecessary to mention, we returned to the room into which I was first introduced, upon coming to the house: and taking seats by the fire, we continued our conversation. I have no room for comment. None, however, is neces-

sary. The guilt! the shame! the heartlessness! the *hypocrisy* of this nation! will be thoughts that will naturally crowd themselves upon the minds of your readers. These are some of the abominations that exist in the District of *Columbia*! the national domain of the American *REPUBLIC*! within sight of the Capitol and under the stars and stripes of our national flag!—Aye,

The fustian flag, that proudly waves
In solemn mockery, o'er a *LAND OF SLAVES*!

Yours, unfeignedly,

J. M. M'KIM.

LETTER II.

Pittsburgh, Feb. 14, 1838.

REV. JOSHUA LEAVITT:

Dear Brother—I resume the narrative I had commenced in my last, of my visit to the city of “charters and chains.” I am sorry I cannot give you a full detail of *all* my conversation with the keeper of the slave-prison, and of all the facts he related to me; for the whole was to me, and I doubt not, would have been to your readers, replete with interest. But much of the information I received appertained to the *licentiousness* of the system of slavery. Delicacy forbids my going into detail on this subject. Suffice it to say, that the shameless licentiousness which this detestable system engenders, by a moral necessity, among slaves and masters, is not known to, and would utterly astound abolitionists themselves.

When I had seen all I wanted of the ‘pen,’ and its appurtenances, the keeper and myself returned, continuing our conversation in the mean time, to the room which serves the treble purpose of a chamber, parlor, and dining-room, to the keeper, who was the only white occupant of the house.

"Do the slaves never break out of your establishment and escape?" said I. "Very seldom, sir. We have very little trouble in that way, sir, with any of them, unless now and then one becomes desperate." "They do sometimes become desperate, then, do they?" "Not often, sir. There has only one got off since I've been here. He was a fellow that a gentleman bought near Hagerstown, and brought here. He allowed him to go out in the city, and drive his coach, and let him have a good deal of liberty. Mr. Birch told him it wouldn't do, and that he would get off from him. 'O, no danger, said his owner; Billy's a good boy—he'll not leave me, &c., &c. So Mr. Birch let him have his own way. He was a stupid, sleepy-looking fellow—looked as if he hadn't sense enough to run off. But one day he cleared out. Supposing that he would go back to the neighborhood of Hagerstown, where he had left his sweetheart, they went there after him. They tracked him to his old master's house, but couldn't catch him for two or three weeks. They knew he was lying in ambush somewhere about the woods, and now and then visiting his wife. At last they took this plan—his old master and family got appearingly all ready to go out on a visit. They called Billy's wife and told her they were going out that evening, and wouldn't be back till it was very late, and in the meantime she must take charge of things, &c. Well, after they had gone, as was expected, she thought it would be a nice time to have the society of her husband two or three hours, beside a good fire. So she went out to the woods and called him. When he came out, the men who were watching nabbed him. Ha! ha! ha!" The coarse brigand laugh, at the ingenuity of the trap with which this story was concluded, but ill accorded with the feelings excited in my breast, at the recital of the misfortunes of this victim of the white man's wrongs. But I went there, not to vent my sympathies, but for information; so I proceeded by interrogations, to make further drafts upon the communicativeness of my companion. "Well, you must have a good deal of trouble in keeping these people in subordination, have you not?" "Not much, sir; very little. It's all in knowing how to manage a nigger. As soon as you get to know how to manage them, you get rid of trouble. I can tell, as soon as I get my eye on a nigger, what sort of a fellow he is, and how to work him. Some's very good and kind, and easily managed—they always look pleasant and good humored. But some's wicked, and desperate,

they have a surly, sneaking look. When you get a fellow of this kind, you must know how to manage him. You must set him at work right away, and keep him always doing something—chopping wood, or something of that kind. You must let him know that you are to be the master, and not him. You must mind, and if you tell him to do any little thing, and he doesn't do it right away, you must give it to him. There's a fellow of this kind here now—a desperate rascal. Didn't you see that fellow close up beside the wall—on the right hand side, as we went into the cellar? That fellow with the high forehead—the stoutest man in the establishment—didn't you notice him?" I acknowledged that I did not remember the person he alluded to. "Well, that fellow I have to keep my eyes on. When I go in where he is, I make him stand back, away from the door. Didn't you see how I kept my stand beside the door, when we were in there?" I acknowledged that I had not observed it. "Well, I did; I can't trust that fellow." He had said, before this, that his practice was to take this precaution with the whole of them. "Whenever I want any of them for any thing, I go to the door of the pen, and make all the rest stand back, and then call the one I want. Some might think this foolishness—but I tell you it won't do to give a nigger any advantage." But recurring to the man just spoken of—"The fellow," said he, "is from _____ County, in Maryland. His master was afraid of him. The fellow would knock down any man that would attempt to lay a hand on him. His master, to get his good will, indulged him, and tried to keep the right side of him. He tasked him to ten cord of wood a-week. This he could soon finish, and then he had the rest of the week to play. But his master was afraid of him. He sent him to Washington with a letter, and now we've got him in here?" "How?" said I—"I don't understand you." "Why, you see, his wife was here in the city. His master used to let him come up three or four times a year, to see his wife, and stay a few days with her. He always spent his Christmas holidays here. So last Christmas, his master gave him a letter to Mr. _____ in the city, and he brought him to us. He says, 'I came here to spend my Christmas holidays with my wife—and here I am!' Ha! ha! ha!—I had to laugh to hear him tell about it."

I asked him if he was not afraid of such persons as the one he spoke of. "No, not much—sometimes I feel a little afraid,

but it won't do to let them see it. I go in at night, into the cellar, when I shut up, fix the blankets about the little ones, and let them see I have no fear. One must look stern and fierce. Oh, they think, sir, that *I'm the very Devil!*"

"You say you have to 'give it to them' sometimes—you flog them pretty often, I suppose?" "No, sir, not often—but you can't get along without some." "How many lashes have you ever given a man at one time?" "Oh, Lord, sir, we never lash them—always with the *paddle*, sir." "Well, will they let you beat them without resistance?—are you not afraid to strike them?" "Oh, we always put the *snapples* on, and then make two or three hold them, if they're desperate." "You make them get down on their hands and knees, I suppose?" "No, sir; we draw them over a bench—first strip them—then draw them over a bench; then I sometimes put my foot in the *snapples*; and lean over and give it to them. The paddle is a great deal better than the lash, sir—you see it gets well in two or three days, and is devilish sore during that time." "Well, I suppose you use an *oak* paddle?" "No, sir—always *pine*. I used to have a heavy oak paddle, with holes bored in it; but pine's the best—it stings like the devil, and is over in a few days."

Somewhere about this stage of our conversation, a young girl, belonging to the establishment, came to the door, and said something to the keeper which, from the position I occupied, I could not understand. "Tell her," said he, in reply, "she can't get in now." And then, turning to me, he said, "The wife of that fellow from Maryland, is now at the door, and wants to see her husband; but she can't get in; there's too many down there now."

After the specimen he had given me of the desperate ones, he referred me to one whom he had seen down in the cellar, who was a very "good and kindly fellow." When he had finished his description of him, he added—"He's one of the unfortunates niggers I ever saw. He got off from his master three or four years ago, and was living in New Jersey. He had married a wife, and got a snug house and lot, and had his ducks, and geese, and pigs, and every thing nice around him. But his master found him out. Poor fellow! he was caught too nice."

My companion further informed me, that they were making up a cargo for the South, and expected to "ship" them in a few days. They were daily expecting the "Tribune," a vessel they

had purchased from Franklin & Armsfield, to arrive in the port of Alexandria. On this subject, he spoke of the horror which these poor creatures had of being taken out *at night*, and related a number of facts, showing the terror they felt at the idea of being awakened *at night* to set out on their southern journey. He spoke of this as a curious fact, for which he could not account.

"I believe," said I, "the dread of going to the South is very general among the colored people." "Yes sir—but they treat them very well there. The Marylanders treat their niggers a great deal worse than they do at the South. Why there was Mr. _____ bought a family of slaves and brought them here, some time ago. The children had never had a hat, or a handkerchief, or a pair of shoes. "Why, the Marylanders are said with us to be very kind to their slaves, and to treat them well. "Well, they may *treat* them well enough, but they don't *clothe* them well. Why there was a girl came here the other day, about twelve years of age—all she had on her back was a thin frock, and a coarse under-garment: Cold as the weather was, she hadn't a shoe to her feet."

After I had got as much information of this kind as I thought my memory would retain until I got home, where I might commit it to paper, I changed the conversation. "Well sir," said I, "I hate slavery—I never could be a slaveholder." "No, nor I, sir," promptly replied the keeper;—"I wouldn't like to be *much among them*. If I could have a good plantation with a set of good, kind niggers, I wouldn't care. But you can't always get such—you will have to have some wicked fellows, and I should be afraid of them on a plantation, where they have so much liberty. I should hate, too, to have slaves about me on a plantation, on account of *its effect on myself—on my temper*. You have always to look stern and angry, and I wouldn't want always to be that way.

After some further conversation of this kind, I expressed a desire to see those two men in the cellar he had referred me to in his remarks. He threw up the window which looked out upon the 'pen,' and had them called up. They answered very well the description he had given of them. The one was a stout, well made man, with a high forehead, fine look, and very intelligent face. The other was a mild, gentle, and good-looking fellow, with a good deal of shrewdness depicted in his counten-

ance. I put a number of questions to the former, and while I did so, he trembled at every joint—supposing, of course, that I was going to purchase him, and that the time had come for him to leave his wife. He told me where he was from—that he was a member of the Baptist Church, &c. &c. “Would you like,” said I, “to go and live with me?” “I don’t know, sir,” was his hesitating reply. “I don’t look as though I would be very hard on you—do I?” “Don’t know sir; you musn’t always judge by the looks,” said he. “Ah!” said the New Jersey man, “them that looks the easiest are sometimes the worst.” “Well, would you rather stay in Maryland than go to the South?” “Yes, sir,” said he, slowly, as though afraid to speak out his mind; “I would rather stay in Maryland if I could.” “Well, don’t be uneasy, I am no slaveholder, and don’t want to buy any. We don’t have slaves where I live—I’m from Pennsylvania.” “I thought you was,” said the New Jersey man, jumping and laughing, “I knowed you was—I knowed you was, as soon as I saw you.” Both seemed much relieved at finding out my character.

We returned to our seats by the fire, and I resumed—“Well, sir, I hate slavery, and want to see it abolished.” “Yes, sir, it’s not right; I would never own a slave. I believe if I was to own a slave, my old father would get up out of his grave.” (His father, he had previously told me, was an Englishman.) “Why, sir,” said I, “how can you say you would not own a slave, when every day you are buying and selling slaves?” “That’s true,” said he, not attempting to reconcile the inconsistency, “all about this house are slaves for life.” But running on, he said, “They had abolition up before Congress this winter; but Patton’s resolution has put a stop to it. This abolition petitioning is just an attempt to join church and state.” And here he denounced the petitioners at a round rate. I defended them. But he insisted upon it, that it was meddling with what we had no business—taking away their property. It was backed up by religion, and was an attempt to join church and state, &c. But it will all blow over; the slave traders tell us they don’t care a d—— for it—they an’t afraid of it.”

After a good deal of further conversation of this kind, I rose to take my leave. I thanked him for the courtesy he had extended to me, and the information I had received. At the same time, I asked him whether he felt any regret, now that

he knew fully my sentiments, at having spoken to me as freely as he did. "No, sir, I don't care." I again made my acknowledgments and took my leave.

In the account I have now given you of my visit to this charnel house, and my interview with its keeper, I have repeated substantially our conversation, as far as the account goes, and as nearly as my memory and notes would enable me—the order and words in which our conversation was conducted. Of course, much transpired which, for reasons alleged, I cannot here repeat. The imagination and reason of your readers may fill up the ellipsis.

During my stay at Washington, I visited also Franklin & Armfield's immense slave factory—conversed with its keeper—saw its 50 or 60 wretched prisoners—scanned its high walls, its bars and bolts—heard the keeper tell how kind they were to their prisoners, how mild southern slavery was, and how badly the Marylanders treated their 'biggers,'—of course how much better the condition was of those who were brought up in Maryland, and brought there—heard from him how they never separated families, &c. &c. Heard him, too, contradict himself and unsay all he had said, when examined and cross-questioned. But as you have visited this establishment yourself, and as my letter is already too long, I forbear going any further into detail.

One result of my visit to these prisons, dear brother, is the conviction that *no man can fully appreciate the horrors of American slavery*. Abolitionists themselves have but an inadequate idea of the tears and groans, sin and sorrows, lacerations and privations, lust, shame and blood of this fell system.—Would that every northern apologist, clerical casuist, and Christian defender of the "institution" of slavery, that have distinguished themselves in this controversy, could pay such a visit to our capital as I have done. Would that our good people of the North, who refuse to petition for the abolition of the slave trade, who deem it inexpedient, who are afraid of excitement, and of inflaming our southern brethren, could have been with me, and having seen and heard what I saw and heard, in this painful but interesting visit. They would have either repented in shame for their past conduct, or if not, have proved that they were without principle and without hearts.

I have only room enough on my sheet to add, that while at W. I made no secret whatever of my sentiments, nor did I feel that there was any necessity for so doing. I spoke them freely wherever occasion seemed to call for it—in the lobbies of the capital, in the company of my friends, and in the family with which I boarded, and in a few instances, with pro-slavery members of Congress. And in no case was I treated with disrespect. There are many indices in the state of things at Washington of the advancement of our cause. Abolitionism is *hated* by some, *feared* by others, but by none *despised*. Yours for the slave,

J. M. McKIM,